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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000461

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: GOZ SEALING COUNTRY AHEAD OF ELECTIONS?

REF: A. HARARE 456

[1](#)B. HARARE 350

[1](#)C. HARARE 349

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER KIMBERLY JEMISON FOR REASONS 1.5 B/D

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Government of Zimbabwe appears to be setting the stage for a considerably reduced international presence in Zimbabwe in the run-up to and during the March 2005 parliamentary elections. Withdrawing its request for UNDP elections assistance (Ref B) and suggesting it does not plan to request food relief (Ref C) evince GOZ intent to reduce foreign access to the country and to maximize ruling party control of key electoral levers. The crackdown on the independent press and harassment of NGOs also play into this effort to close off the electoral process to outsiders. END SUMMARY.

FOOD "SELF-SUFFICIENCY" INCREASES RISK OF FOOD POLITICIZATION

[1](#)2. (SBU) Maize distribution could be solely in the hands of the GOZ during an important election period if Zimbabwe significantly reduces or even eliminates its appeal for food aid this year. In the past, ZANU-PF has used food as a political tool and a Grain Marketing Board (GMB) monopoly on maize distribution would work to the party's advantage. As suggested in ref B and confirmed at a UN/donor meeting on March 15, the GOZ requested that this year's Consolidated Appeal include no reference to food assistance beyond June [1](#)2004.

[1](#)3. (U) The December 2003/2004 FOSENET food security monitoring report noted an increase in allegations of political bias in accessing GMB food stocks over the last few months, particularly in Mashonaland East. The report identified the following districts as having problems with political bias in food access: Chikomba, Marondera rural and urban, Mudzi, Hwedza, Bindura rural, Guruve, Mazowe, Chegutu urban, Norton, Zvimba, Bikita, Chiredzi, and Chivi. Of these districts, Marondera, Bindura, Chegutu, Bikita, and Chiredzi had constituencies almost evenly split between the MDC and ZANU-PF during the 2000 elections.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Prior to many parliamentary and urban/rural council elections over the last two years, ZANU-PF candidates and officials were accused of bribing voters with food. Typically, the ZANU-PF district office received bags of maize which only card-carrying ZANU-PF members were able to purchase. In some places, showing cards was not enough and prospective buyers had to produce letters from community leaders or local party officials attesting to long-standing party loyalty and activity. Throughout the food crisis, FOSENET, a coalition of 54 local NGOs that monitors the food situation in Zimbabwe, has reported that ZANU-PF party members were favored in GMB food sales and international food relief distributions, although the latter allegations were infrequent and swiftly dealt with by international NGOs. For its part, the GOZ has ignored such complaints and counter claimed that some NGOs were selectively distributing to opposition elements.

IS SELF-SUFFICIENCY POSSIBLE?

[1](#)5. (U) A GOZ claim that Zimbabwe will be self-sufficient in maize depends on the country's final production and ability to secure the foreign exchange to import the remainder of its need. Fueling prospects for maize production are improved rainfall--although for crops planted in February the rains must continue through April--and increased hectareage planted to maize(Ref C). PolOff spoke with the Famine Early Warning

System (FEWS) on February 26 about likely production. FEWS said preliminary Agricultural Research and Extension Services (AREX) maize estimates based on likely area planted and yield suggest production in 2004 of between 780,000 and 1,170,000 MT (area at 1.3 million hectares and yields between .6 and .9 MT/ha). These estimates are based primarily on communal area planting, as data about the resettled areas is generally unavailable. According to FEWS, AREX estimates are generally within 20 percent of the final Central Statistical Office statistics. Other estimates for the 2004 season range from 600,000 MT to 1.2 million MT, with total maize consumption needs at approximately 1.8 million MT.

16. (U) President Robert Mugabe has directed his ministries and the Reserve Bank to import 800,000 metric tons of grain this year at a cost of USD\$240 million (Ref C). Such a procurement will challenge the GOZ's budget given the other urgent demands on foreign exchange such as electricity and fuel imports, and seems to rely on unrealistic expectations of economic turnaround. Last year, GOZ efforts to import maize were stymied by foreign exchange shortages. Although negative growth may slow modestly this year, most local UN, IMF and World Bank economists expect the economy to contract 5-10 percent, which does not bode well for increased foreign exchange earnings. Furthermore, the punitive nature of the auction system is a disincentive for exporters and will not stimulate export revenue (Ref A). We are estimating that exports fell to US\$1.4 billion in 2003, of which the GOZ kept only US\$350 million by withholding the mandatory 25 percent of revenue from exporters. This year's tobacco crop--the major foreign exchange earner--could be as low as 45 million kilograms. Last year, Zimbabwe exported between 80 and 103 million kilograms worth US\$248 to US\$318 million.

17. (SBU) PolOff asked a FEWS representative about the GMB,s purported 240,000-300,000 metric tons of maize stock. The representative had acquired a GMB spreadsheet showing GMB sales and stock drawdowns, which showed that the GMB had sold about 100,000 tons of the 300,000 tons it had in January. The representative suggested that the GMB was continuing to sell its stocks and was not hoarding the stash for future political benefit. He also stated that the GMB would not be able to retain grain stored now until February 2005.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA CONTRACTING

18. (U) With the apparent demise of the nation's only independent daily and growing regulatory constraints against the few surviving weekly independent newspapers, independent coverage of news events in Zimbabwe is limited. Absent unexpected changes in the media environment, the vast majority of Zimbabweans will receive coverage of election candidates and issues through the prism of ZANU-PF editors at heavily biased official media organs. The GOZ can be expected to continue its exclusion of foreign reporters, who for the most part have been expelled or systematically denied visas. The ongoing saga of the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe court case and the dismissal of three Herald newspaper journalists who freelanced for Voice of America also play into this effort to close off observation of the electoral process to Zimbabweans and outsiders alike. Statements by the Media and Information Commission that the conduct of the journalists is a threat to national security further evince GOZ intent to tighten control of all media sources for the foreseeable future--controlling information flow into and out of the country.

NGOS TARGETED

19. (SBU) Over the last few years, the GOZ has become increasingly suspicious and hostile towards nongovernmental organizations. In 2002, the GOZ tried to enforce elements of the Private Voluntary Organizations Act that restricts the activities of some PVOs and NGOs. As several loopholes within the law allowed some of the GOZ's most ardent critics to still operate, the GOZ is threatening to limit the remaining organizations, movements with the NGO Bill, which is in the draft stages.

10. (C) More recently, the GOZ has threatened to step up harassment of local NGOs. Within the last few weeks, an NGO working on democracy and governance issues received three visits from police and a call from the Central Bank warning of increased scrutiny, and a director of one of the local human rights NGOs recently told PolOff that the organization had been tipped that they would be raided soon. The human rights NGO was habitually harassed before, during, and after the 2002 presidential elections. In addition, GOZ officials have accused several international NGOs of being anti-state and thus against the Zimbabwe people. Indeed, such accusations against food-related NGOs at the recent UN-GOZ meeting in Victoria Falls highlights the nexus between food

and politics in the GOZ's world view. Also at the Victoria Falls meeting, the GOZ targeted the International Organization for Migration, which provides assistance to displaced ex-farm workers.

11. (S/NF) Indications in sensitive reporting that the GOZ intends again to embark on an effort to dismantle the NGO's "parallel structures" of food distribution manifest the depth of GOZ suspicions and desire for control.

COMMENT: ELECTORAL PROCESS TO REMAIN INSULATED AND ISOLATED

12. (SBU) The GOZ seems poised to keep the electoral environment restrictive in preparation for the March 2005 parliamentary elections. Its continued mistrust of NGOs and priority on controlling the election environment are most likely the principal reasons behind GOZ reluctance to accept international assistance with the elections and to entertain the continued need for emergency food aid. Scaling down the international relief effort would reduce the international presence in Zimbabwe enhancing GOZ control of food distributions for electoral advantage and reducing the international window to aspects of election administration. Eliminating the independent press and firing or expelling journalists who work with international news agencies would advance the same purpose. That said, the GOZ is cognizant of its need for international aid as administered by NGOs though and will often act more gingerly than its truculent words might suggest. Late last year, for example, the GOZ backed down from threats to require that all food assistance go through official channels. The extent to which it will go beyond harassment and regulatory constraint of NGOs and the media will hinge largely on how confident the party leadership feels toward elections--they will do what they feel they have to in order to come out on top. END COMMENT.
SULLIVAN